

The HUAC v. Hollywood

The Congress's House Un-American Activities Committee launched an investigation into purported Communist influence in the movie business. HUAC subpoenaed writers, directors, actors and studio executives and inquired whether they "were now or had ever been a member of the Communist Party."

A panicked movie industry frantically sought good will with Congress and the public by launching its own Communist hunt. They brought in ex-FBI agents to clean up the studios. The agents recorded anyone thought to possess suspicious political beliefs on a blacklist. Such individuals did not work for the movie studios again. A similar wave of frantic self-purging took place within other news and entertainment media, including television and radio.

Others were soon caught up in the atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Among the better known was comedic genius Lucille Ball whose experience was atypical in that she recovered her career and popularity. Ball's grandfather had been an old railroad man who idolized Eugene Debs and convinced young Lucy to register to vote in California as a Communist. Years later when her "crime" was discovered, the blacklists banned Lucy from the studios, thus ending a promising movie career. She fought back by forming her own production company and making the well-known television series "I Love Lucy."

Public anxiety increased dramatically in 1949 when Americans learned that the Soviet Union had successfully tested its first atomic bomb. For the first time in recent American history, the United States faced a realistic threat from abroad. Reaction was sharp and swift. The government began investigating possible links between American Communists and the passing of U.S. atomic secrets to the Russians. This led to a number of high-profile prosecutions, culminating in the conviction and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. During the sensational Rosenberg trial, a flamboyant young prosecutor named Roy Cohn caught the eye of an ambitious U.S. Senator named Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy recruited Cohn and the up-and-coming communist hunter became the Senator's chief of staff. Before they were done, their partnership would cut quite a swath across the American political and social landscape.

The Rise and Fall of the Pepsi-Cola Kid: Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin

Joseph McCarthy won a Senate seat in 1946. Over the next four years he distinguished himself only by his dedicated drinking and otherwise scandalous behavior.

Soon he earned his nickname "The Pepsi-Cola Kid" by taking a bribe from that soft drink giant to lead the fight for continued government regulation of sugar prices. McCarthy successfully kept the government ceiling on the price of sugar. His dalliance with Pepsi was so embarrassingly blatant that even his fellow Senators (who usually took care of each other in such matters) derisively dubbed him the "Pepsi-Cola Kid."

Casting about for a sure-fire reelection theme, McCarthy settled on the hunt for Communist subversives.

It is important to note that McCarthy did not invent this issue. The climate of fear and anxiety accompanying the growing Cold War rivalry with the now atomically-armed Soviet Union caused many Americans to give credence to any "danger" pointed out to them by an authority figure. McCarthyism is associated with the Red Scare and often referred to as the Second Red Scare. The Red Scare is the

applied term given to a time in which Americans feared Communist influence in the United States from 1917 to 1920. McCarthyism brought about the Second Red Scare in the United States in the late 1940s. McCarthyism is also used today as a more all-purpose term to describe the general practice of making false allegations, specifically of pro-Communist activity and most often based on irrelevant evidence.

So, during a speech at the Wheeling, West Virginia, Republican Ladies' Auxiliary Club Lincoln's Birthday Dinner in February 1950, the junior Senator from Wisconsin whipped up the crowd when he dramatically waved a sheet of blank typewriter paper over his head and intoned that thereon he held the names of 205 known Reds currently working inside Truman's State Department. Not to worry, however, because he, fighting Joe McCarthy, was hunting them down. The following evening in Salt Lake City the Senator told a similarly enthusiastic gathering that he was hot on the trail of 81 known Communists willingly employed by the Democrats in their State Department. Later, he returned to Washington and confided to overjoyed GOP leaders that he was in pursuit of 57 Communist agents in the State Department. McCarthy was an alcoholic.

Given the chairmanship of the Senate's Government Operations Sub-committee, McCarthy now possessed full subpoena power. He immediately launched into his crusade, perfecting a form of persecution and slander now known as "McCarthyism."

"McCarthyism" consisted of hurling unsubstantiated charges against a particular individual until he was pressed too closely for evidence. He would then turn his accusations on his challengers, having sufficiently destroyed his original victim's public reputation.

In the late 1940s and 1950s it was enough to be accused of being a Communist. Unproven charges could be profoundly damaging. McCarthy hurled his accusations with energetic abandon. Political opponents were not just mistaken or misguided; they became part of "a conspiracy so immense" that unless they were stopped America and the whole world would fall to communism. He personally traveled to his Congressional opponents' and critics' home states and campaigned against them as traitors to their country. Nor was McCarthy alone. Before McCarthy's rise to prominence, others had already used the tactic. Most notable, Richard Nixon won his first Congressional race in 1946 by falsely charging that the incumbent Democratic Congressman received secret support from Communists.

At the height of his popularity, one poll found that 69 percent of the American public believed that Senator McCarthy was doing a good job in ridding the nation of the menace of secret Communists.

Pressured to produce at least one Communist with real evidence, in 1954 McCarthy took on a fight he could not win. He challenged two powerful giants in American culture--the United States Army and CBS television news anchor Edward R. Murrow.

The nationally televised Army-McCarthy Hearings allowed the public a raw look at the man Joseph McCarthy. He claimed that top Army officials were either Communists, Communist sympathizers, or Communist "dupes" (that is, the unwitting tools of Communist manipulators). He had no evidence.

Desperate to bolster his flagging standing with the public, McCarthy decided to explain his troubles as a journalistic conspiracy against him. He decided to denounce the almost universally admired and respected Edward R. Murrow of CBS Television News as a secret subversive.

Finally, McCarthy had overreached himself. Between the efforts of the Army's dogged defense counsel James Welch and the blistering personal profile that Murrow produced, McCarthy's credibility with the public all but disappeared. Suddenly, the Senate became emboldened to issue him an official reprimand and strip him of his leadership roles.

McCarthy died three years later due to complications associated with his alcoholism.

The HUAC

The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigated communist organizations. The HUAC came into being because they wanted to prove that many actors and writers were communists. The content of Hollywood films has always been regulated in one form or another, however between 1947 and 1954 the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) became indirectly involved in this kind of regulation. After the Second World War the America's alliance with the Soviet Union ended, the Cold War began, and the "Red Scare" moved into full force. The HUAC members considered it their duty to purge the country of any Communist influences. While numerous industries were investigated by HUAC, because of Hollywood's high profile, it became the best known target of this infamous committee.

In 1947 the committee's purpose was threefold:

First, it intended to prove that the Screen Writer's s guild had Communist members.

Second, it hoped to show that these writers were able to insert subversive propaganda into Hollywood films.

Third, J. Parnell Thomas, head of the committee, argued that President Roosevelt had encouraged pro-Soviet films during the war.

Although none of these claims was ever substantiated, the committee's tactics worked to force many talented and creative people to leave Hollywood.

The HUAC *blacklisted* many people. Blacklisting means putting people on a list of suspected communists. It meant that their professional reputation was destroyed, and that no one would hire them for fear of being thought a communist. The HUAC and Joseph McCarthy forced many people to testify at their hearings. They asked if the people had ever been communists, they asked if they were communists now, and they asked them for the names of people who could be communists. Most people did not want to answer, because they felt that it was a violation of both their civil rights and any people they might name.

The committee immediately blacklisted the ones who refused to cooperate. As a result of this, people who were afraid that they were going to be charged gave the names of people that they knew were not really communists. Many actors couldn't star in movies anymore because they were blacklisted. Some authors for the big screen continued to write movies using fake names, but most never worked again. Some were forced to leave the country.

During the initial hearings so-called “friendly witnesses” were asked to testify. These people were allowed to read prepared statements and were treated with respect. They were not under suspicion, but, instead, were willing to testify about any Communist activity that they were aware of in Hollywood.

Nineteen “unfriendly” witnesses were subpoenaed. These were people whom the committee considered to be Communists. Although only eleven were called to testify, all their lives were deeply affected. German playwright Bertolt Brecht was the only one of the eleven to answer any questions on the stand. He claimed he was not a Communist, but after testifying he immediately left Hollywood to return to East Germany. The remaining ten became the famous so-called “Hollywood Ten”. One director (Edward Dmytryk) and nine screenwriters (John Howard Lawson, Dalton Trumbo, Albert Maltz, Alvah Bessie, Samuel Ornintz, Herbert Biberman, Adrian Scott, Ring Lardner, Jr., and Lester Cole) took the stand and refused to answer any questions, claiming their Fifth Amendment rights.

These ten witnesses knew they had three options.

- They could claim they were not and never had been members of the Communist Party (this would have meant perjuring themselves);
- they could admit or claim membership and then be forced to name other members (and this would have meant losing their jobs both because of their former membership and their dubious position as informers);
- or they could refuse to answer any questions (which is the choice they made).

Although most lawyers would agree today that the Fifth Amendment gave them the right to choose this last option, the committee (and then the courts during appeals) did not agree. All ten were held in contempt and subsequently served between six and twelve months in jail, although one, Edward Dmytryk, later agreed to cooperate with the committee and did not serve his entire sentence. The remaining nine were blacklisted by the Hollywood film community and found themselves forced to use pseudonyms in order to sell scripts. (“Robert Rich”, for instance, who won the Oscar for Best Screenplay for “The Brave One” in 1956, was actually the blacklisted Dalton Trumbo.)

The HUAC political investigations removed talented individuals from the system and affected the kinds of films being made while the new censorship systems began to splinter the audience from one mass group into smaller specialized groups. Although one was a repressive force that drove talent away (HUAC), and one was a non-repressive force that loosened censorship and created new audience interests, both contributed to the collapse.

- [Jeanine Basinger, American Cinema: One Hundred Years of Filmmaking, 1994](#)